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Prisoners of the Media: Television in Russia since the Collapse of Communism

Jeffrey Brassard

In 1991 one of the most oppressive regimes in history collapsed and millions of people were set free. Following the implementation of *glasnost* and *perestroika* Soviet communism proved untenable and was consigned to the trash heap of history. The Soviet media itself played a tremendous role in facilitating the collapse. After Soviet President Mikhail Gorbachev removed censorship from the Soviet press they began looking into the past transgressions of their nation and reported it aggressively. As a result, the Soviet state and its Russian successor became a much weaker power agent and other agents of power appeared to challenge the power of the state with regards to the media. Television, as the most important medium in Russian society, came to be a special case. The power relations in Russian television are essentially a historical map of power relations since the collapse of the Soviet Union. Power in Russian media is made up of a complex set of relationships that is worth exploring.

Russia's media went through an enormous transition following the collapse of communism. To understand Russia's place in the world today it is important to understand the power relations that have shaped it. Julia Razanova (2007) argues that:

> The change in the media systems in all post-Communist countries of Central and Eastern Europe is part of a larger process of systemic social transformation, connected to changes of a society's economic system, political regime, social consciousness, political culture and the public view of the media. (p. 133)

The change in the structure of media systems shapes the changes in power structures in post-communist nations, but also has a role in shaping the direction of these changes. According to research conducted by Sarah Oates and Stephen White (2003) by 1991 ninety-two percent of Russian households had at least one television (p. 1). Their research indicates a large discrepancy between the number of Russians that read daily newspapers and the number of Russians that watch television news. Of the 2000 Russians interviewed in their survey seventy-seven percent watch nightly national news programs, while only seventeen percent read a national newspaper daily. Thus, it makes sense to examine the Russian television system in order to understand the media system in Russia.

The focus of most analysis of Russian television has been on news making. This area seems to be the most fruitful for the analysis of power relations. The fact that Russian news media has been the primary area of analysis does not, however, mean that the entertainment media in Russia is not also part of a national identity project. The analysis has simply tended to gravitate towards the more serious public discourses represented by television news. The Russian media environment, like Russian society itself can be characterized by its instability. As such, to gain an understanding of current power relations it is necessary to trace the power relations as they emerged and changed through the 1990s and into the early part of the 2000s.

There are many agents of power that play a role in the production of television news in Russia. The most powerful of these agents are the Russian State and the owners of television channels. The Russian state is the most important agent of power. Olessia Koltsova (2006) cautions, however, that the power of the Russian state is difficult to describe. She claims that "even in the most stable and well structured societies the State never forms an ideally consolidated group smoothly directing all its actions to the same goal... Any modern state is a complex institution that embraces multiple organizations" (p. 46). The Russian State's power over the media comes from a number of practices. The first is the granting of broadcast licenses. Koltsova (2006) argues that "the State... owns the majority of the means of communication, including most radio and TV signal transmitting networks" (p. 51). Thus the state, by controlling what can be broadcast, is able to exercise influence over the content that is produced either by granting or by revoking broadcast licenses. An example can be seen in the story of Peterburg Kanal 5. This once popular, national television station fell out of favor with the State and, as such, had its broadcast license revoked. It was very quickly replaced by NTV, a channel run by an ally of Boris Yeltsin.

The State also has the ability to both create and enforce laws and regulations. This is particularly important in the Russian case because of the Russian State's alternatively loose and severe enforcement of the rules. Following the collapse of the Soviet Union the laws of the Soviet state regarding media had to be dismantled. Koltsova (2006) argues that the system that took its place was characterized by "superfluity [meaning] that all the relevant rules taken together turn out to be entirely or almost unobservable," further commenting that current Russian media law "automatically makes any relevant actor an offender: obeying one norm, s/he inevitably breaks another" (p. 54). As both the rule maker and the only body that has access to legitimate uses of violence, the State can produce virtually whatever results they wish.

A third, though not insignificant way that the State is able to exercise power is through the use of public funds. This is particularly important in the

Russian case because all television broadcasters were in some way reliant on the state for some type of funding. There are two general strategies that may be used, either direct-funding as in the case of both national state owned television networks (ORT and RTR) or, as in the case of the privately owned NTV, support may be given through the use of tax breaks or state backed loans (Koltsova, 2006, p. 194).

The second most influential group is made up of those who own the media. Koltsova (2006) divides media ownership into two categories: internal and external (pp. 73–85). Internal ownership, according to Koltsova, means that the owners expect their media outlet to be profitable and that they anticipate that it will be self sustaining. External ownership implies that owners do not expect the media holdings to be profitable and are willing to pump large amounts of money into them. According to Koltsova (2001), the three national Russian channels, ORT, NTV, and RTR, are externally owned (p. 322). The typical owners of Russian media holdings have been the "oligarchs" such as Boris Berezovsky and Vladimir Gussinsky (Koltsova, 2006, p. 77). The "oligarchs" are the group that was able to amass great fortunes from the privatization of Russian state property following the collapse of the Soviet Union. Koltsova (2006) suggests that the oligarchs "see media first of all as weapons to gain political capital—a vital resource that later can be converted into all other forms of capital outside the media domain" (p. 77).

The history of the Russian media since the collapse of the Soviet Union can be split into two broad phases. The first phase took place roughly between 1991 and 2000 and was remarkable for the relative freedoms that the media enjoyed. The second is the period beginning with the election of Vladimir Putin as president of the Russian Federation in 2000 and continuing to the present. This second phase is characterized by the reassertion of the Russian state's influence over the media. Both phases represent a different idea of what Russia should become and serve the interests of very different groups.

The first historical phase mentioned (1991–1999) can generally be understood as a very chaotic period during which there were a very large number of players involved in the production of television news. The power relations that were in play during this period were perhaps the most evident during national election periods in 1993, 1995, 1996, 1999, and 2000. Russian elections can be divided into two groups: elections of the Russian parliament, called the Duma, and presidential elections. Duma elections are held first and a few months later the presidential elections are held. The elections are held on fixed dates set by the 1993 Russian constitution. Campaigning is restricted to a one month period prior to each election. Two television channels played significant roles in the elections during the period under discus-

sion. The first was the primarily state-owned ORT, which was, at the time, at least partially owned by the oligarch Boris Berezovsky. The second was the privately owned station NTV which was owned by Media-Most a conglomerate belonging to Vladimir Gussinsky.

The Duma elections of 1995 and the presidential elections that took place in 1996 perhaps best exemplify the power relations that were at play in the Russian media. The television station NTV was a relative newcomer to the Russian television market. NTV was founded in 1993 by Gussinsky and originally leased airtime from another Russian station, *Peterburg Kanal 5*. By the 1995 elections NTV had pioneered a news program called *Sevodnya* that twenty-six percent of Russians believed to be the most objective coverage available to them (Oates & Roselle, 2000, p. 32). The channel had distinguished itself from the state-owned channels through its excellent coverage of the war in Chechnya. Clearly NTV was not overtly pro-Kremlin, or particularly in-line with the official state apparatus. It exercised its power in a way that seemed to produce a change in the policies of the Russian state.

In 1996, however, NTV chose to exercise its now considerable media power in support of ailing Russian president Boris Yeltsin. During the 1995 Duma campaign "NTV's *Sevodnya* provided more balanced coverage" (Oates, 2006, p. 100). While their coverage was less biased "almost 35 percent of the total *Sevodnya* coverage... was devoted to elections in Chechnya" (Oates, 2006, p. 102). Their main rival ORT "often avoided criticism of the government" and "tended to overlook the smaller parties advocating swifter reform, and frequently gave communists as well as nationalists negative coverage" (Oates, 2006, p. 100). In the 1996 presidential campaign, however, "NTV president Igor Malashenko openly joined Yeltsin's presidential campaign team" (Oates, 2006, p. 103). Oates (2006) further observed that "unlike the 1995 Duma elections, NTV's *Sevodnya* offered relatively little to counter the positive and often misleading coverage of Yeltsin" (p. 105). This was particularly true in the election runoff in which Yeltsin faced communist leader Gennady Zyuganov. There are several theories regarding why NTV's coverage changed so dramatically. Oates (2006) has proposed that it may have been related to the granting of a national broadcast license to NTV by Yeltsin following the 1996 election (p. 110). This type of repayment for services is not altogether uncommon in the Russian context but it does represent a very problematic development for Russian media.

The relatively balanced coverage on NTV returned following the presidential runoff. This situation, however, did not last long. In 1999, Yeltsin was facing his lowest popularity ratings since assuming office. He was "rated just 1.8 on a 10 point scale" and "more than two-thirds were prepared to support public demonstrations calling for his resignation" (White, McAllister &

Oates, 2002, p. 17). Months before the election Yeltsin did step down, appointing then Prime Minister Vladimir Putin to the post of interim-president. Putin set about transforming the Russian media system. In the 1999 Duma race and the 2000 presidential elections ORT and RTR, a smaller national television network owned by the state, helped the established powers led by Putin to maintain their hold on power. In this campaign, however, NTV chose not to support Putin and the pro-Kremlin All Russia party. This should not be taken to mean that NTV was being completely unbiased in its approach to the elections. Vladimir Gussinsky, who owned the controlling share of NTV, instead of backing Putin, backed the influential mayor of Moscow, Yuri Luzkov, who was thought to be making a run for the presidency and his party, Fatherland-All Russia. Thus, NTV's support can be understood as Gussinsky exercising his power with the hopes that he would later be able to gain more power and influence from an alliance with the office of the president. In a sense, Gussinsky simply bet on the wrong horse.

At least in part because of the extensive reach of ORT and RTR, which together had a greater reach than NTV, Putin was able to fight off Luzhkov's bid for the presidency. This was done in large part by providing false information to sources who then passed them on to ORT and RTR journalists. This black PR campaign against Luzhkov and his allies was for the most part successful, as they won only 68 of the Duma's 450 seats. Once in power it did not take long for Putin to exercise his power over media, particularly the recalcitrant NTV. Putin began targeting the independent television station. By April of 2001, through the selective application of tax law and the calling in of federal loans, NTV has fallen in the hands of the state-owned oil and gas giant *Gazprom* (Koltsova, 2006, p. 202). The simple explanation for this chain of events was that while Gussinsky, through his media empire, had a great deal of power to shape public opinion, his power was miniscule when compared to the power of the State. The State was able to use legal and semi-legal measures to reassert their control over the whole of the Russian media. With *Gazprom* in command of NTV the Russian authorities could be assured that the exercise of its power would be used in conjunction with the wishes of the state.

It is worth quickly examining the role of the entertainment portion of Russian television. There is, after all, a great deal of television content that is not television news. It is more difficult, in a sense, for a newscast to subvert the official message that is being put forward by the State. Russians, however, have a long history of expressing their dissent through cultural productions. Examples of this from the Soviet Period include the works of Alexander Solzhenitsyn, such as *The Cancer Ward* and *A Day in the Life of Ivan Denisovich,* and others such as the Mikhail Bulgakov masterpiece *The Master and Margarita.* If resistance to the Russian state's official message

is to be found anywhere, it may be found in the creative works on television. Unfortunately, this area does not seem to have been extensively studied and, as a result, there is little literature on the topic. There is enough, however, to suggest that, at least for the moment, resistance in television fiction is minimal. As Stephen Hutchings (2008) suggests in his analysis of the PR campaign surrounding Saint Petersburg's tercentenary, many films are being produced that are intended to "promote a sense of unity of purpose across the diverse factions making up the modern nation-state" (p. 3). Hutchings (2008) suggests that Nikita Mikhalkov's 1997 film *The Barber of Siberia* and Dzhanik Faiziyev's 2008 film *Turkish Gambit* strongly support the desire to create an official Russian state mythology that ties together the imperial and Soviet periods. These works are overt efforts to create and support the meaning of Russian identity as it has been re-imagined since the collapse of communism.

At the moment, the Russian state is the only body with the ability to exercise enough power to shape the national discourse. They have seized control of the means of media production and are using them to further increase their ability to exert power. This may change as it did in Ukraine and Georgia but for the moment the state has complete control over the media. The Russian state's monopoly of the exercise of power in television is complete. For the moment, the office of the president is able to shape all national discourse on television.

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